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ABSTRACT

During the 1984-85 school year, pupils in three age groups participated in an international survey to discover ways in which pupils are taught written composition, what they write, and how their achievements are assessed. The three age groups were: (1) those who had reached or were approaching the end of the class-teacher stage, (2) those who had reached or were about to reach the time when a large proportion leave school, and (3) those who had finished or were about to finish their upper secondary schooling. All participating countries were represented by pupils in group 2 and Sweden had pupils in all three groups. The survey used pupil questionnaires that referred to the teaching of writing, family and school backgrounds, and reading and writing habits outside school, while teacher questionnaires asked about the teacher's education and the method and content of writing instruction. The survey also used written tasks, some of which implied practical information, while others were narrative, descriptive, and ratiocinative. Essays were marked on a five-point scale according to an overall assessment as well as an assessment of content, organization, style, readability, and legibility. Results of the survey will make it possible to convey an accurate picture of the teaching of written composition in Swedish schools at different levels as compared with other countries and will provide an opportunity for developmental studies. The survey intends to identify the conditions in society at large, pupils' homes, and schools that are connected with their written performance. (SRT)

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SCHOOL RESEARCH Newsletter

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MARCH 1986 FIELD - TOPIC 1986:2
Essay writing
Writing instruction
Youth education

Current project

TITLE OF PROJECT: IEA WRITTEN COMPOSITION STUDY

For some years now, about 15 states have been engaged on an IEA survey of written composition in schools. An extensive corpus of questionnaires and essays has been collected with a view among other things to making certain international comparisons. The aspects investigated concern the way in which pupils are taught written composition, what they write and how their achievements are assessed.

The Swedish part of the study involves pupils in grades 6 and 9 of compulsory school and in the terminal grade of upper secondary school. This wide-ranging participation makes it possible to describe the development of writing ability during formative years.

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BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

IEA surveys of various school subjects, e.g. mathematics and science subjects, have been going on since the beginning of the 1960s. Comparisons are made of the organisation and methods of teaching in different countries and, as far as possible, of the pupils' achievements in terms of knowledge and skills.

The IEA survey Written Composition is concerned with the teaching of written composition or essay writing. One of its tasks is to clarify and describe the content and methodology of writing instruction, together with methods of evaluation. It is also planned, if possible, to compare pupils' written performance in different countries.

Participants

The survey refers to pupils in three age groups:

A. This group comprises pupils who have reached or are approaching the end of the class-teacher stage, i.e. grade 6 of intermediate level in the Swedish school system.

B. Pupils in this group must have reached or be about to reach the point in time where a large proportion leave school. In Sweden this is grade 9.

C. The pupils in this group must have finished or be about to finish their upper secondary schooling. In Sweden this means the terminal grade of 2- and 3 (4)-year lines of study.

All participating countries are represented by pupils in group B. Sweden has pupils in all three groups. The number of Swedish pupils taking part is 4,400, viz 1,200 in group A, 1,700 in group B and 1,500 in group C. These pupils have been randomly selected, on a basis of one class per school.

Questionnaires and written tasks

The survey employes questionnaires and various written tasks. Each pupil is required to complete two questionnaires, while their Swedish teachers and head teachers respectively complete one.

The pupil questionnaires refer to the teaching of composition writing, family and school backgrounds, and reading and writing habits outside school. The questionnaire addressed to the pupils' Swedish teachers contains questions about the teacher's education and the method and content of composition teaching. The head teacher is required to complete a questionnaire about the school and its social and cultural environment.

The written tasks have been constructed according to a special pattern. One aim has been for every pupil to write two or three essays of different kinds. Certain tasks imply practical information, while others are of the more customary narrative, descriptive and ratiocinative kinds. The tasks are stated here as presented to the pupils, though the texts and pictures appended were not supplied. The allocation of tasks between groups was as follows:

A: Tasks 1A-1D, 3, 4A-B, 5, 6.
B: Tasks 1A-1C, 1E, 2, 4A-B, 5-9.
C: Tasks IE, 2, 6-9.

WRITTEN COMPOSITION TASKS

Task 1A

Suppose you have been to see your grandfather. In the town where he lives you spotted a group of attractive bikes in a shop. Some of them are shown on the following pages. The shop sells boys' and girls' bikes and has many differently coloured models with many accessories, e.g. baskets, lights, toe clips. You have now had a letter from your grandfather, promising you a bicycle for your birthday. Choose one of the bikes illustrated here and then write the following letter. Describe the bike you have chosen, so that your grandfather will be able to buy exactly the model you want.

Task 1B

You are going to visit somebody (a penfriend, a relative) who has never seen you before. Write a good description of yourself (what you look like, what you will be wearing, whether there is anything which makes you particularly easy to recognise etc.) so that he or she will be able to spot you immediately.

Task 1C

You are supposed to be seeing the head teacher at 10 o'clock, but something unexpected turns up (a valid but not very unpleasant excuse) which prevents you from keeping the appointment. Write a short note to the head teacher so that he or she will not be kept waiting, and apologise for not being able to keep the appointment.

Task 1D

On arriving home from school you find that nobody is in. You are expecting someone in the family to turn up soon. You want to visit a friend and stay there for a couple of hours, but you do not want anybody to worry about what has happened to you or where you are. Write a short note to somebody at home, explaining where you are going, who you are going to see and when you will be back.

Task 1E

Holiday temps required as

- Office workers
- Delivery boys/girls
- Gardeners
- Warehouse workers

We will interview young persons who have completed their compulsory schooling. Minimum period of employment: 1 month between 15th June and 31st August. Applications, in writing and stating the duties and period of employment preferred, are to be addressed to the Municipal Offices, Personnel Section, 995 00 BROSTAD.

You saw this advertisement in a newspaper and want to apply for one of the jobs. Write a letter, asking for an interview.

Task 2

Summarise the following passage in just one paragraph, with complete sentences. Your summary must include the essence of every paragraph in the original text. (The text is approximately one A4 page and describes how the development of communications has made the world seem smaller.)

Task 3

The following story is about Elk and Rabbit. If you read it closely you will find that it also has something to tell us about human beings.

Read the passage and re-tell the story in your own words. Make your version shorter than the original. (The set passage is a fable.)

Task 4A

The task here is to describe the picture of an Indian mask so that a reader who cannot see it will be able to envisage it quite clearly.

Task 4B

Think of something you are good at, perhaps something you are an expert at. Tell somebody who is less of an expert than you what to do. You can illustrate your description if you like.

Task 5

Here are some headings for different stories. Choose one of them and describe what happened to you or could have happened to you. You can change the heading if you like, so that it will match your story better.

1. When I made a difficult decision
2. I did it - at last
3. When I did a good deed
4. My dream came true
5. When I found a new friend
6. My most dreadful experience
7. Then I realised how another person can feel

Task 6

Think of something you have very firm views about, something connected with your home, your school, the place where you live or society in general.
Write an essay and give the reasons for your view. Try to make the reader agree with you.

Task 7

A number of statements and questions are set out below. Write an essay in which you consider and reflect on them, stating your own views on the subject. You can agree and disagree with different views. In your composition you can refer to observations of your own, to books which you have read, to films and plays or anything else which will help to make your point.

1. Does television make it more difficult to have a mind of your own?
2. Many young people today find older people difficult to speak to and understand.
3. What might happen if pupils were given more say about what they learned in school and how they learned it?
4. What would the world look like if the role of women in society were radically changed?

5. Preoccupation with acquiring possessions is the main thing which prevents people from leading a free and noble life.
6. One is never so lonely as in the middle of a crowd.

Task 8

The task here is to reflect on a picture (the region of the eyes in a face) and to write, for example, a letter, a story or a conversation.

Task 9

Suppose you have a friend two years younger than yourself. He or she wants to know how to write good essays. Write a friendly letter giving at least five hints based on your own experience of what is particularly important when sizing up essays.

Assessment

Essays are marked on a five-point scale, with five as the top mark. Each essay is subjected to an overall assessment, as well as being marked for five particular aspects. Each essay is marked by two independent judges.

The judges have been specially trained for this kind of marking and have a manual to go by. This requires them to begin by reading an essay at normal speed, without stopping to correct, mark, delete or comment on anything. They then have to put down their first impression of the essay as a whole, awarding a mark accordingly.

Marks are then awarded for content, organisation, style, readability and legibility respectively. Content refers to the diversity of views and ideas, organisation to the way in which the material as a whole is set out, and style to the suitability of the pupil's language with reference to a notional reader, the subject and the object of the task. Style is unsatisfactory, for example, if the pupil has difficulty in varying his sentence structure, repeats words and phrases or commits a breach of style (anastylosis).

Deviations, commonly regarded as unacceptable, from the rules of grammar and usage come under the heading of readability. This aspect includes misspellings as well as bad and indistinct punctuation, errors of apposition, conjunction errors and wrong verb forms.

legibility is assessed on a three-point scale, the purpose of this assessment being to distinguish between essays with distinct, regular and clear handwriting and those in which the handwriting detracts from readability and from the intelligibility of what has been written.

Classification of content

In task 9, pupils in grade 9 and in upper secondary school are required, on the strength of their own experience, to give a younger friend at least five hints on things to bear in mind when writing a composition. The content of these essays has proved well worth analysing. A comprehensive set of categories has been devised and, although the processing has yet to be completed, the grade 9 pupils seem to think that formal aspects - orthography, neat handwriting, indentation for a new paragraph, correct punctuation etc. - are the most important considerations, while upper secondary students attach importance to content and arrangement.

All pupils were asked to specify the three subjects they enjoyed writing about most and least respectively. Their answers have generated an extensive category matrix, but no results can yet be presented.

Time scale

All the material was collected during the 1984/85 school year. Processing this material is an extensive, time-consuming undertaking, with about 12,000 essays to be marked and about 9,000 questionnaires to be categorised with a view to subsequent computer processing.

This survey will make it possible not only to convey an accurate picture of the teaching of written composition in Swedish schools at different levels, as compared with other countries. It will also provide an opportunity for developmental studies, due to the same subjects being treated by pupils at different levels. Finally, the plan is to identify conditions in society at large, pupils' homes and schools connected with their written performance.

Interim reports will be issued continuously if possible and are likely to have an interesting bearing on the organisation of written composition teaching in youth education.

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